

# THE GENEROSITY OF STUFF

## SERIES: THINGS OF EARTH - AN ADVENT JOURNEY



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Various Scripture  
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### *Various Scripture*

I brought a "show and tell" this morning. It's nothing fancy, just a loaf of bread. Put this down in front of a hungry group, and it'll be gone in a few minutes.

This particular loaf of bread is the work of my hands. I measured out the flour and water, and salt. I have cared for the starter for over a year now. I attended to this dough for several hours as it rose: I folded, separated, and shaped it. Finally, I baked it in an oven I had purchased with my money. I timed it carefully, and now here it is.

I made this bread. It is the work of my hands.

This morning is our second week of Advent when we're looking at the "Things of Earth." The fact that Jesus came to earth as a human in a particular city at a concrete time in history has implications on how we understand the physical stuff of this world. Last week we talked about the power of place. We thought carefully about what God's purposes might be for this unique place where we live in the world.

For the next two weeks, we'll be talking about what to do with the work of our hands. Next week Dan Westman will help us to think about simplicity. This week we're thinking about generosity. When we talk about giving at PBC, we usually say that giving is an act of worship. Today we're going to unpack that statement.

We'll think about the work of our hands, God's work, what happens when we give stuff away, and how our work can be transformed into worship. I've called this sermon "The Stuff of Generosity" because we'll explore how our stuff relates to our giving.

We need this because we have a problem in our culture. When we give, we don't actually give stuff. We give money. Money is incredibly convenient, but it's just a piece of paper. Or, more often, it's a number on a screen. It's not actually anything real. It's disconnected from the work that we do day to day.

That was different for most of the world. The people of the Bible lived in an agrarian economy. That meant that you worked really hard to produce actual stuff—your food, your clothing, your housing, your tools. You, or someone you knew, made a lot of the stuff in your life. So when you gave something away, you were giving away something that you made with your hands, like the loaf of bread I baked.

Today we live in an industrial economy. That means that our stuff doesn't come directly from our work. We do some work, get paid with money, put that money in a bank, buy something, charge it to our credit card, pay that credit card off later in the month, and enjoy the thing we bought. As William Cavanaugh said, "We used to make things; now we buy them."<sup>1</sup>

If I were to give you this loaf of bread, it would be meaningful. You know that I made this myself. But if I tell you that I want you to have some bread, and I give you \$5 and tell you to go to the Safeway market and buy some bread, it's just not the same.

This is part of why it's hard to understand how giving at church can be an act of worship. I'm not giving anything that I made. I give money, which is what I was compensated with for the stuff that I worked on. If I'm a computer programmer, I don't give code away. I give the money away that I was paid for making code.

I don't even give away physical money. Most of our giving are done electronically. We click a button, and that's all we do in the act of giving generously. What does it mean then to say that giving is an act of worship? How is clicking that button worship when so many other button clicks in my life aren't worship? Maybe you don't even click a button every month because your giving is on auto-pay. How can giving be an act of worship if I'm not taking any action when I give?

When we say that giving is an act of worship, we have some challenges to really experiencing that idea.

To help us with that, we'll look at several sections of the Scriptures. I have three simple ideas that I want to

convince us of. We'll look at how the offering worked in the Old Testament for the first two. For the last idea, we'll think about the practice of the early church. I hope this will help us to experience generosity as worship.

## Old Testament Stuff

If you've been with us for the past few months, we've been studying the book of Exodus. We heard about how the Egyptians burdened the people of God with heavy labor. We read how their spirit was broken because of their harsh slavery. Most recently, we read how God led them out of bondage in an incredible display of power.

In January, we'll resume the story by reading the instructions God gives his people for how to live as His people in the Promised Land. But today, we want to look at one of those commands later in Deuteronomy. Here's what Moses instructed the people of Israel.

### Deuteronomy 26:1-2:

**“When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it, 2 you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there.**

Remember that the Israelites had just come from slavery in Egypt. As slaves, their work was controlled by someone else, and they didn't get to receive the produce of their labor. This is the injustice of slavery. Someone else forces you to work, and you don't get to keep what you make. They had lived like that for a long time.

Then God freed them from slavery, and the nature of their work was transformed. For the first time, they worked as free people.

My first job was in high school, working at a sporting goods company. I sold rollerblades. I still remember how incredible it felt to receive a paycheck every two weeks. I was earning money. Every week, my bank account balance grew. I could spend that money however I wanted.

That's the joy of free work. This is what the Israelites might have experienced the first time they worked their

own land and ate their own produce instead of working under the whip of an Egyptian master.

But over time, that feeling fades. For me, the novelty of selling rollerblades turned into a burden. The paycheck that used to feel like a miracle seemed smaller and smaller. What used to be a joy became tedious. What used to seem like a lot seemed like barely enough.

You can imagine that the Israelites felt the same way. The privilege of having their own land became a burdensome responsibility. The land flowing with milk and honey started to seem like a grand exaggeration.

How would they remember that they lived in a land of plenty? As the memory of slave life faded, how could they remember the incredible gift of receiving the work of their own hands?

Simple: they could give some of it away.

Listen to how scholar Michael Rhodes puts it,

*Israel's establishment in the land tempted them to return to an economy of hoarding and scarcity.*

*[The commands for offering] reaffirms that abundance comes to humanity as sheer gift and invites the Israelites to participate in the economic sharing of this gift.<sup>2</sup>*

Giving some of their stuff away reminds them that they have enough. The offering was a reminder that they lived in a land of plenty.

Let's think about how that worked. Archaeologists have discovered an ancient calendar describing Israel's yearly cycle of life. They call it the Gezer Calendar, from the 10th century BC, right around the time Solomon would have built the temple in Jerusalem.

The calendar reads:

Two months gathering

Two months planting

Two months late sowing

One month cutting flax

One month reaping barley

One month reaping and measuring grain

Two months pruning

One month summer fruit

This was life for the ancient Israelite.

How would it have felt to give away the first of your harvest? You've spent two months planting and two months of late sowing. During that time, you would be eating stored food from last year's harvest—dried fruit and preserved grain for four months.

In late March or early April, the first crops would be ready to be harvested. You had been waiting months for some fresh food. The first that you harvest gets put in a basket and brought to the temple.

Why would God ask you to do that? What did it teach you?

Year after year, you would learn that there is enough. You live in a land of plenty. You give away your first fruit, but more is always coming later. God always provides for all of your needs.

Generosity does this for us as well. It reminds us that we live in a land of plenty. Do you live in God's Kingdom of Plenty?

We're not slaves to Egyptian taskmasters, but many of us are slaves to our jobs. We feel like we have no control. We are driven by something that doesn't seem healthy. We hoard our money and protect it at all costs. We can't be too generous because we aren't even sure there will be enough.

We are constantly tempted to return to a mindset of hoarding and scarcity. But giving our money away reminds us that we have enough. We are free. The work of our hands belongs to us. We can give it away because God will provide more when we need it.

That's our first big idea that our generosity is a way to avoid the mindset of hoarding and scarcity. Generosity reminds us that we live in a kingdom of plenty. But there's more to the story.

## Depending on God

Let's go back to the loaf of bread that I started talking about. A few minutes ago, I claimed that this bread was the work of my hands. I made it.

That is a pretty audacious comment. I had nothing to do with growing the wheat or milling the flour. I didn't create the natural yeast. I didn't design the chemical reaction between flour and water, which forms gluten

strands. I certainly didn't do anything while the bread was in the oven, transforming from wet dough into light, airy bread.

You could say that I made this loaf of bread, but all I did was combine a few things. The actual making of bread happened as a result of processes totally outside of my control.

People who work the ground are very familiar with this reality. Farmers work hard. They prepare the soil, plant the seeds, irrigate the crops, protect them from disease and pests, and eventually harvest the crops. But they are dependent on so many other things going right. One flood. One drought. A bunch of locusts. Anything can happen that makes their work meaningless.

Isn't this true of your work too? You do a lot of stuff at work. You work hard. But when you think about it, aren't there other forces entirely outside of your control? If nothing else, you're dependent on the air you breathe and the food you eat. Only the most arrogant among us would dare to claim that everything we have received is due to our hard work and effort.

The work of our hands is not just the work of our hands. It's also the work of God.

And yet, we are tempted to forget that last part. We regularly slip into the false notion that everything we produce comes from our hard work. My labor. My effort. My intelligence. I made this loaf of bread.

God does something to help me remember that he had a part in it. I bring the first fruits of my work to God and listen to what happens to them.

### Leviticus 2:14-16:

**"If you offer a grain offering of firstfruits to the Lord, you shall offer for the grain offering of your firstfruits fresh ears, roasted with fire, crushed new grain. 15 And you shall put oil on it and lay frankincense on it; it is a grain offering. 16 And the priest shall burn as its memorial portion some of the crushed grain and some of the oil with all of its frankincense; it is a food offering to the Lord."**

The work of your hands—the first fruits of the food you had been growing for months—was given to God and burned before you. Notice how vividly it's described. Fresh ears, roasted with fire, crushed new grain. It makes

you hungry, right? Imagine how much more so if you'd been eating old food for four months.

You gave away the first of your fresh food. Then you watched some of the work of your hands literally go up in smoke. The word used here for burn refers to smoke ascending. You also mixed your offering with frankincense. You didn't only watch the work of your hands go up in smoke. You smelled it.

You smelled some of the work of your hands go up in smoke. It's called a "pleasing aroma" to the LORD. Among other things, this part reminds you that nothing you have came to you apart from God's blessing. You've earned it, but you've also been blessed with it. You've worked hard for it. But it's also been given to you. All that you have, you have received from God.

So it comes down to this: give to depend on God.

When I bring my grain offering to God and watch and smell as some of it turns into smoke, I am reminded that a large portion of what I have produced is only due to the goodness of God in my life. I've worked for it, but I've also been blessed by it. Giving is a visceral, physical, and financial way to recall that neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

Giving isn't a noble act. It's just honest. A recognition that anything I have comes as much from the goodness of God as it does from my own hard work.

## New Testament honesty

Generosity reminds us that we live in a kingdom of plenty. Generosity reminds us that everything we do is dependent upon God. Let's put a few of these things together and see how this becomes worship.

The Old Testament had very specific amounts and portions that each person was supposed to give. Some were given every year and some every third year. But the New Testament is different. It doesn't give specific instructions around giving. Instead, we are encouraged to give generously.

### 2 Corinthians 9:6-8:

**The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each one must give as he has decided in his heart,**

**not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.**

Notice some of the same themes that we saw in the Old Testament. The theme of plenty: "whoever sows bountifully will reap bountifully." The theme of giving freely: "each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or compulsion." The theme of dependence on God: "God is able to make all grace abound to you."

We know that the church carried forward the idea of giving God the firstfruits from the instructions in the Old Testament. One of the earliest orders of worship we have is from a pastor named Hippolytus, who served in Rome in the early 3rd century, around 215 AD. Here's a passage from one of his worship services related to offering. Listen to how he lays it out:

*Whoever has the firstfruits of the earth is to bring them to the church, the first of their floors and the first of their presses, oil, honey, milk, wool, and the first of the produce of the work of their hands, all this they are to bring to the bishop, and the first of their trees.*

People bring in whatever they produce from their hands: oil, honey, milk, wool, and more. They present it to God as an act of worship. They bring the actual stuff they make, whatever it is. It is not an offering of money. It is an offering of stuff. Imagine how meaningful it must be to bring the actual work of your hands to present as an offering for the community. But it goes one step deeper.

[Image]

Look at this fourth-century mosaic of a woman bringing her first fruits into worship. Notice that she is carrying the grapes and the wheat. She could have been a farmer who had a small vineyard. This would have been very common in the fourth century.

Think for a moment about what happens with that wheat and grapes. They aren't burned like in the Old Testament; they are used in worship. The wheat could have been baked into bread. The grapes turned into wine. What did the church do with bread and wine?

They served it to each other as communion. When the woman brings the work of her hands to the church, it is literally transformed into the body and blood of Christ. Her community gathers around the table to



partake of that body and blood. And then they are sent out into the world to do the work of God wherever they live and work.

We give generously of the work of our hands to the church gathered. Our gifts become the body and blood of Christ, which nourishes us with the presence of Christ to go out to do the work of God. And so the cycle continues over and over again. My generosity becomes worship, which fuels your work and enables you to be generous. It becomes worship, which fuels another's work, enabling them to be generous over and over again.

Remember how the apostle Paul said that God is able to abound all grace to you so that you may abound in every good work. This is part of how God does that. We are nourished through the worship of our brothers and sisters and empowered to go into the world to do the work of God.

This is how our giving is caught up in the story of Christ and transformed into a powerful act of worship.

Our generosity is transformed into worship. When we give generously, that is worship. So when we worship, we do so generously. Worship generously.

These three elements are all happening on a spiritual level when I give an offering to the church. I am choosing to live in the kingdom of God's plenty. I am expressing my utmost dependence on God. I am watching as the work of my hands becomes transformed into the means of worship which nourishes the whole community.

Don't you feel that in your soul when your bank automatically transfers money every month? Yes, I don't, either. So how do we experience this? It's easy for the woman bringing grapes and wheat. What about us?

Honestly, this is part of the mystery of the Incarnation. Huge cosmic spiritual realities play out in the smallest of physical activities. Our earthly actions are always disproportionate to the theological forces they set into motion. My encouragement to you is to find something to do, some action to take, that enables you to give generously. Connect to this storyline.

Maybe it's writing a check. Maybe it's using text-to-give so that you can do something on a Sunday morning.

Perhaps it's a prayer when you get the email confirmation of your automated gift. The specific act isn't important. But find a way to connect with the kingdom of plenty, the depth of your dependence, and the transformation of your gift into worship.

## Conclusion

I started this morning by telling you about the loaf of bread that I claimed to have made. The bread is really the work of my hands. But we have also seen how this is just as much the work of God. We have learned how when I give this gift to you, the gift becomes the stuff of worship.

We're going to celebrate a time of communion now. Communion is the ritual—the regular and repeated act—that Jesus has given us to remember the story of the gospel.

Let me remind us that every time we take communion, it's your gifts which are transformed into the ingredients of worship. Your generosity supplies the cup and the bread. Your generosity translates into guitar strings, pastor salaries, and electricity for the projectors. Your generosity is transformed into worship every Sunday morning and throughout the week as we go from here into the world.

So come to the table. Take of the body and blood of Jesus, and be sent out into the world.

## Endnotes

1. William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 37.
2. Michael Rhodes, "Follow Us as We Follow Moses," in *Ecclesia and Ethics*, ed. by Edward Allen Jones III, John Frederick, John Anthony Dunne, Eric Lewellen, Janghoon Park (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark Publishing, 2016), 179.